

LET'S LOOK IT UP IN THE DICTIONARY

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A nouveau riche desires an exclusive name for his country villa; a wealthy mother wants expert advice upon a name for her child that will stave off certain superstitious elements in the coming battle of life; numerology is accelerating the demand.

Chiefest, however, is the business man who seeks a distinguishing mark for a commodity he is about to market. Perhaps this potential manufacturer solicits the coöperation of an advertising man for this task, for such professionals make a specialty of just the right words, searching hours sometimes in quest of the proper term to express precisely their thoughts; and not without pleasing monetary compensation, it might be added. But however the prospective producer obtains the new term, he guards it with secrecy until it can be registered in the files of the United States Patent Office.

Here then is another fountainhead of many original words that are used glibly by the man on the street as though they had been extant forever. We have more than 50,000 trade terms in our word shop; but no great proportion are in the dictionary, because the discards have failed to gain the approval of the public. When such a coinage is ratified by popular use, however, occasionally it becomes worth hundreds of thousands of dollars to its owner.

For example, probably few people realize that the word "celluloid" once was owned by a person who controlled the destiny of that word just as legally as his building, his machinery and other chattels.

That "vaseline" and "petroleum jelly" are synonymous seems almost absurd at first blush, so common is the use of the former word. But let a corporation other than the sole and rightful owners of the term "vaseline" attempt to market petroleum jelly of exactly the same context under that patented name, and the brilliant legal talent of one of the greatest oil companies in the world would immediately coöperate with a sheriff's office to regain possession of the word. So great is the popularity of the word "vaseline" that the native appellation is seldom heard now outside of pharmaceutical circles.

Oddly, "groceries" is patented, "cafeteria" isn't; "aerogram" has an owner, "radiogram" is a free lance. Extensive advertising of these terms, combined with an innate phonetic appeal, is chiefly responsible for their widespread use. There has never been a test case to prove the issue, but some legal authorities maintain that patented trade terms can be withheld from the dictionary by the owners of the words.

Trying to Recover a Stolen Word

Again, old and established words are sometimes supplanted by newer names that are calculated to add more distinction to the persons or products they describe. Undertakers, tenderly performing the last rites for the departed since no man knows exactly when, decided to change the name of their calling to one more elite, and now they are "morticians."

Practically every make of firearms is named after its inventor and his surname has been registered and universally used as the designation of the weapon, as Gatling, Colt, Winchester and Browning. Such developments are constantly pushing the covers of the dictionary farther apart.

And now we come to the sad case of "tabloid." "Tabloid" is the brain child of a British chemist. He conceived this word for a concentrated product which he had prepared. It was patented in several countries, including the United States, and entered the language under the careful guidance of its father. Almost from its birth, however, this mental mintage was the object of covetous fingers and it was kidnaped for other purposes. A lawsuit in Rome and another in London restored the wandering word to its legal guardians.

Then came an epidemic of half-size newspapers in America, and the publishers appropriated the term, without license, as a name for their bisected periodicals. Popularized by the press, "tabloid" captured the fancy of many writing craftsmen and since this flare we have been inundated with tabloid journalism, tabloid sermons, tabloid enthusiasm, and perhaps some delicatessen-fed husbands have used the term aptly to describe their meals. "Tabloid" was stolen, if so harsh a term may be used, from its progenitors.

Following this widespread piratical use, the chemist-owner of this word came to our shop one day, asking our assistance in the recovery of his word "tabloid" from its captors and inquiring what he could do to regain it. We informed him that he could institute legal proceedings against each user and—at that time, when it had just been abducted—possibly obtain damages from each user. We added, however, that the American public seemed to like the little word so much that such a course probably would prove disastrous to himself. We suggested that he should present it to the language with his compliments. So there it is now, evidently firmly entrenched.

Who's Who in the Dictionary

Not only places of public interest but names of people, together with an epitome of their deeds, are in the dictionary. Nor is it a tomb of ancient immortals only. When a living person pokes his head above the horizon of the average of us by exploit or position in life, which gives promise of continuance in the public mind, he or she becomes the object of attention by the lexicographer.

Every President of the United States is, of course, accorded a notation in the dictionary in the next edition after his inauguration, if he hasn't already been recorded there. Statesmen of prominence, leading scientists, doctors, authors, singers, inventors, everyone whose fame may carry his name into posterity, is carefully watched for the possibility of being included in the dictionary.

Now that the new word is captured, the next step is to register it in the master dictionary. This complex volume is an index of practically all human thought. It is really more of a loose-leaf file than a dictionary, for it is but a temporary abode for most words, a crucible of speech housing a host of transient vocables of doubtful vintage that will soon fade from view, unknown and unlamented by the public at large.

This master dictionary probably could be called more properly a lexicographer's notebook, as it harbors, in seasons, thousands of words which but few people will ever see, hear or use. However slight though its value may be to the general public, it is by far the most important document in the keeping of the dictionary maker, for it contains the gathered harvest of his labors, and it is carefully stored in a steel vault as a protection against fire or destruction. Were we stripped of this repository of the latest crop of virgin words, all our activities to the hour of that catastrophe would have been in vain and subsequent steps in enrolling the language rendered impossible. So, even though more than half waste, the master dictionary is guarded with jealous care.

A third step in aiding a word to enter the catalogue of speech is the dressing of it in a proper attire—correct spelling. It is somewhat unfortunate that the twenty-six letters of our alphabet are productive of sixty-eight different sounds. The very first letter of the alphabet even has seven different choices of sound values—as in art, ape, fat, fare, fast, what and all, not to mention the *e* in "obey" masquerading as an *a*.

Benjamin Franklin, besides his other manifold activities, viewed this situation with consternation a century and a half ago, and succeeded in rectifying the confusion in

spelling in a measure by designing and sponsoring a new code of spelling, now known as the textbook form, which was a happy advance from the Chaucerian style. Think of padding words today in the fashion of the Father of English Poetry, as in these few lines from his *The Knightes Tale*:

*Have mercy on oure woe and oure distresse,
Som drops of pitee, thurgh youre gentilnesse,*

*Uppon us wrecchede women lat thou falle.
For certus, lord, ther nys noon of us alle,
That sche nath ben a dutchesse or a queene.*

Then the other extreme. The textbook form of spelling has become the standard for academic instruction in the United States, and it is therefore the first spelling form for the dictionary. But since the days of Poor Richard there have been many changes in word formations—an extra *e* dropped from one word, a spare *b* from another. They are slight changes always, just a slow gradual pruning of the silent letters which have cluttered and in many spots still do clutter our written and printed speech.

Following in the footsteps of Franklin, a group of serious-minded citizens gathered, in the year 1877, to reconstruct our spelling to a rigid phonetic basis; that is, to have words spelled the way they sound.

It soon became evident that a strictly phoneticized alphabet would mean practically the reeducation of the English-speaking world in two of the three R's, reading and 'riting. In view of this, scientific rigor was sacrificed in some degree to the hope of popular acceptance, but it was not forthcoming. Exact phonetic spelling would render Lincoln's Gettysburg Address into this effect:

"For scor and sevn yerz ago our fathers brot forth on this continent a nu nashon, consevd in liberti and dedikated to the propozishon that ol men ar created equal. Now we ar enjaid in a grat sivil wor, testing whether that nashon . . . so consevd and so dedikated, can long endur. We ar met on a grat battilfil ov that wor. We hav com to dedikat a porshon ov that fild as a final resting plas of thoz hu her gav thar livz that that nashon mit liv. . . ."

Words That Pass in a Night

This scientific spelling was approved in 1910 by the National Educational Association. In another century, perhaps, this system of sound spelling will have become popularized and even superseded by more startling changes. Thus each new word now entering the language is given two spellings, unless by chance they coincide, one for the older generation and one for the budding generation.

Then when the stranger at the door of the dictionary has been properly spelled and pronounced, the next task is to discover what it means. As most of the new words slide almost noiselessly into usage, there is seldom any clew for their interpretation other than the few flanking words of context from which they are taken.

A first, second or third appearance of the new word in print or talk may perhaps disclose no precise sense, because other users slightly shade its significance each time it is used. Repetition, however, soon dispels this divergence of meaning among writers or speakers by some seemingly mysterious transference of thought to a probable single interpretation. If two or more meanings persist one is almost mathematically certain to gain the greater currency and eventually win at least first place in the dictionary from its rival.

Slang is the most untractable. It is too transient, in the mouths of the many today, superannuated by another wise crack tomorrow. These fancies we usually list with a lead pencil in a conviction born of experience that they will fail to pass final tests for inclusion in our word book.

Yet some slang terms may enter the dictionary—in time. "Dumb-bell" and "highbrow," for instance, seem sure to be recorded, and the verb "to crash" in the sense of breaking into a party or game without invitation or ticket is another that is taking firm root.

Indeed, some of the slang of today is sure to be used by fastidious writers of a following generation. The process is perennial. "Idiot," signifying an imbecile, was once slang for a private citizen. "Buncombe," meaning bombastic speech or any showy utterance for effect, is another. This latter comes from a remark made by a member of Congress from Buncombe County, North Carolina, who confided to a compeer that he was talking "only for Buncombe" when on the floor of the House. He was, apparently, for from this word "bunk" is derived.

Too, defining words today must be precise, for space in the dictionary is limited. A word must be so synonymized that it can be replaced in a sentence by its own definition. When the craft was young—I lift this from a seventeenth-century lexicon—a lobster was described as "a little red fish that walks backward." Such interpretation is more like a guessing contest, for a lobster is neither a fish nor red, unboiled, and it doesn't walk backward.

Einstein's Theory in 100 Words

What would you do if you were suddenly called upon to describe Einstein's theory comprehensibly? The little unobtrusive German-Swiss scholar turned from his telescope one night and sketched an idea born of his searchings in space that electrified the academic world. In one thesis he upset the orthodox tenets of master mathematicians and astronomers.

Awesome rumor related that only twelve very, very highbrows in all the world could comprehend the intricate reasoning involved in the revelations of Einstein. The more mysterious the new disclosure was heralded, the more people desired to know what it was, and the dictionary maker had to find out.

Our word shop sheltered many puzzled countenances at that time. The scholars of twenty centuries were consulted. The most modern methods of science were subpoenaed in the quest for popular enlightenment. Then, from the mass of evidence collected, it was discovered that the basis of the riddle of relativity had been solved more than fifteen years previous to Doctor Einstein's pronouncement by an American meteorologist in the service of Uncle Sam at Washington, D. C.

However, to the Swiss physicist who first broadcast his findings cleaves the recorded glory. If you want to know the gist of relativity, but have feared to broach the subject because it is too deep, look it up in the dictionary. You will find it tersely explained in less than 100 words.

Definitions must be exact, also, because Congress enacts many laws with the aid of a dictionary. A mistake may strip the Internal Revenue Department of thousands of dollars in income. For instance, the dictionary is used by the United States Board of Customs Appraisers to determine the nearest general grouping of a new incoming commodity so the appropriate toll may be levied against it. If the dictionary should be in error the Government would be the loser.

After a new word has been captured, registered, spelled and defined comes the last and most important step in its adventures of seeking entry into the sanctuary of our speech. It is brought before the committee of admissions, which group is composed of expert philologists and laymen steeped in language lore. This is the court of last appeal that passes upon the credentials of the vocables which have been

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